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ABSTRACT

This study investigated possible differences in family background characteristics of 140 undergraduate students, half of whom were fraternity or sorority members, at a state university in the southeastern United States. Students were asked to complete checklists which asked if they were members of Greek-letter fraternities or sororities. Three other variables were tested: parents' income, father's educational level, and parental membership in elite social clubs. Analysis of the data indicated that students who were enrolled in Greek-letter organizations were more likely to have parents who were members of elite social organizations, parents with higher incomes, and fathers with higher levels of education. The study also found that Greek-letter students tended to have higher levels of social involvement on campus. Three tables summarize data on the three variables tested. (Contains 11 references.) (CH)

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Comparisons of Socioeconomic Background Characteristics of Greeks and Independents

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Abstract

This study investigated possible differences in the familial background characteristics of Greeks and independents. The subjects were one hundred forty students who were enrolled as undergraduates at a southeastern state university during the Fall term of 1996. Randomly selected students completed checklists which identified their: Greek or independent status, parental income, fathers' and mothers' education, and parental membership in elite social clubs. Greeks' parents were found to have higher incomes, higher levels of fathers' education and higher rates of membership in elite social clubs than the parents of independents.

This study provided new evidence that Greek membership is related to having parents with memberships in country clubs or yacht clubs. High levels of parental involvement in elite social clubs could be a background source of Greeks' comparatively high levels of social involvement on college campuses. Increased knowledge about background differences between Greeks and independents could suggest ways to increase independents' graduation rates while promoting inclusive and harmonious university communities.

Membership in Greek-letter fraternities and sororities has been associated with persistence until earning a Bachelors degree in addition to increased satisfaction with social involvement in college (Astin, 1977). Astin's (1977) involvement theory contended that students who are involved in college activities and social life are more likely to persist until graduation than less involved students. Baier and Whipple (1990) investigated differences between family incomes and parents' education of Greek and independent students in order to increase understanding about background characteristics which may influence the attitudes and values which Greeks and independents bring to college. The purpose of this research is to investigate possible differences in the backgrounds of Greeks and independents which may affect graduation rates, personal development, and the social atmosphere on college campuses.

Empirical evidence (Reiss, 1972) indicates that fraternity men are much more socialized in dating and love experience than independent men. Rogers and Havens (1960) supplied evidence that fraternity actives were more likely to date than male dormitory residents. According to these researchers, inherited socioeconomic prestige heavily influences college dating and resulting marriages. Their research indicated that students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are much less likely to date during college. Willard Waller's (1937) groundbreaking article on college dating included evidence that socioeconomically diverse large state universities have well-developed Greek

systems which encourage dating among high socioeconomic status students while strongly discouraging dating among lower socioeconomic status students. According to Scott (1965) the sorority system which strongly influences sorority women to only date high status fraternity men has its strongest influence on college social life in the large state universities. Thus, extensive evidence exists to suggest that independent males and independent females are likely to experience socioeconomically-based disadvantages in college dating which may hamper their personal development during an important formative period. Research into socioeconomic background background differences in Greeks and independents may increase knowledge about the socioeconomic basis of class-based variations in college dating.

Understanding values and attitudes which students bring to college and identifying the influence of college organizations on perpetuating or altering values and attitudes promotes individual student development and pluralistic college campuses which function as harmonious communities (Baier & Whipple, 1990). It would be interesting to empirically test the extent to which attitudes of social elitism attributed to Greeks by Marlowe and Auvenshine (1982) are present upon entry to college in comparison to the extent to which social elitist attitudes are encouraged by the Greek system.

Pike and Askew (1990) found that fraternity and sorority members' parents have higher levels of income and educational attainment than parents of independents. This finding strengthens

evidence from earlier research (Dollar, 1966) which indicates that Greeks have parents with significantly higher socioeconomic status than the parents of independents. Miller's (1973) research indicates that Greeks have higher levels of family social status and higher levels of extracurricular involvement than independents.

Examining social class background differences among Harvard undergraduates, (Zweigenhaft, 1993) found that 12 per cent of the prep school graduates but only 5 percent of the public school graduates had memberships in elite social clubs such as country clubs, yacht clubs or polo clubs. Zweigenhaft (1993) found that Harvard students with memberships in prestigious social clubs tended to choose careers where social skills are advantageous. Greeks' comparatively high levels of campus social involvement may partially be explained by their connections to elite social clubs where social interaction skills are developed.

In order to empirically investigate possible differences in socioeconomic background characteristics of Greeks and independents three hypotheses were tested. Hypothesis one was levels of parental income were significantly higher for parents of Greeks than for parents of independents. Hypothesis two was ranks of fathers' and mothers' education were significantly higher for Greeks' parents than for independents' parents. Hypothesis three predicted that Greek membership was related to having parents with elite social club memberships and independent status was related to not having parents with elite social club memberships.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects for this study were randomly selected from undergraduates attending a southeastern state college. Two hundred seventy-four undergraduates completed checklists which measured socioeconomic family variables.

Variables

The grouping variable for all three hypotheses was the respondents' Greek or independent status. Dependent variables consisted of three types of variables concerning background characteristics. The dependent variable for hypothesis one was parents income. The dependent variable for hypothesis two was fathers and mothers rank of education. The dependent variable for hypothesis three was frequency of parents elite social club membership.

Procedure

The university's official university approval for this research was granted through the university's process of human subjects review approval.

Subjects who completed the checklists were randomly selected from undergraduate pedestrians near the university union during October of 1996. Checklists were completed between 10:00 am and 12:30 pm between Monday and Friday.

After seventy Greek-affiliated students had completed checklists the data were entered into a computer account along with

the data from seventy randomly selected checklists completed by independents.

Analysis

Since the hypothesis one's dependent variable (parents' income) was measured according to continuous data and two grouping variables were involved the independent T-test was used. Since hypothesis two's dependent variable (fathers' and mothers' education) was ranked data and two grouping variables were involved the Mann-Whitney U test was used. Since the dependent variable for hypothesis three (parents' elite social club membership) was nominal data and two grouping variables were involved the Chi square test of independence was used.

Considerable research evidence (Dollar, 1966; Bair, Whipple, 1990 ; Pike, Askew, 1990) existed to support predictions of hypothesis one and hypothesis two that Greeks' parents have higher incomes and higher levels of education than independents' parents. Therefore, one-tailed hypothesis tests were used to test hypotheses one and two. Research (Zweigenhaft, 1993) which has indicated that Harvard's prep school graduates were more connected to prestigious social clubs than Harvard's public school graduates demonstrates the importance of this variable for understanding differences in college cultures. However, since I know of no systematic research evidence that Greeks' parents have higher frequencies of membership in elite social clubs hypothesis three will be treated as a two-tailed test.

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The alpha level of less than or equal to .05 was used as the rejection criteria for all hypothesis tests.

RESULTS

As Table 1 indicates, statistically significant higher frequencies of elite social club membership existed for Greeks' parents than for independents' parents. Forty percent of Greeks' parents had memberships in elite social clubs while only fourteen percent of independents' parents had equivalent memberships. Thus, evidence was provided for hypothesis three's prediction that a relationship existed between Greek status and having parents with memberships in prestigious social clubs and that a relationship also existed between independent status and not having parents with prestigious social club memberships.

Table 1. Percent of Greeks' parents and independents' parents having elite social club memberships

	Greek respondents	independent respondents	
Parents have had elite social club membership	40% (28)	14% (10)	p <.01
Parents have not had elite social club memberhip	60% (42)	86% (59)	p <.01

A T-test provided evidence for hypothesis one's prediction that significant mean differences in parental income existed between Greeks and independents. As Table 2 indicates, Greeks had parents with annual incomes which averaged $52,000 while independents had parents with annual incomes which averaged $42,000.

Table 2. Mean differences of Greeks' parents' and independents' parents' annual incomes

grouping variable	means	T value	df
Greeks' parents	$52,000*		
independents' parents	$42,000*	2.24*	128.14

* significant at < .05 alpha level

Table 3 provided evidence for hypothesis two's prediction that higher mean ranks' of fathers education existed for Greeks' fathers than for independents' fathers. However, no significant differences were found in the mean ranks of mothers' education for Greeks and independents.

Table 3. Mean ranks of education of Greeks' fathers and independents' fathers

Grouping variable	mean rank	2-Tailed P (corrected for ties)
Greeks' fathers education	79.94	< .01
independents' fathers education	59.06	< .01

DISCUSSION

Evidence for hypothesis three's prediction that higher frequencies of prestigious social club memberships have been held by Greeks' parents than independents' parents was provided by this study. This finding suggests that high levels of Greek undergraduate involvement in student organizations and student interactions documented by Pike & Askew (1990) could be related to Greeks' parents' high levels of involvement in prestigious social clubs.

Evidence for hypothesis one which indicated that parental incomes are higher for Greeks that independents provided support for Baier and Whipple's (1990) evidence that Greeks have higher family incomes than independents. However, Baier and Whipple's (1990) study found Greeks' parents to have double the annual income of independents' parents. This study found Greeks' parents incomes to surpass independents' parents incomes by only $52,000 to $42,000. While Baier and Whipple (1990) found higher levels of fathers and mothers education for Greeks, this study found higher levels of fathers' education for Greeks but no significant differences in mothers' education between Greeks and independents.

Thus, familial background variables of Greeks and independents may vary from campus to campus. Further studies could employ increasingly precise, reliable and synchronized methodology to measure background characteristics of Greeks and independents on college campuses in regions across America.

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Further investigations of background variables of Greeks and independents could test whether or not Greeks' parents have more socially oriented careers such as law or business than than parents of independents. More investigations should test for relationships between Greek membership and increased frequencies of parental membership in prestigious social clubs.

Better understanding of substantial familial background differences which may exist between Greeks and independents could help America's college campuses successfully face the challenges of increasing sociocultural diversity. Increasingly precise and well-articulated identification of background differences in Greeks and independents provides an increased basis for understanding the benefits and the detriments of being Greek and being independent. Better understanding of the benefits and detriments of Greek and independent college experiences could increase knowledge about how both Greeks and independents can attain maximum social, cultural and career-related benefits from the college experience.

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